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A Postscript to the Foregoing

the world and every stratum of society, has been slowly but surely educated during the last few years to a greater appreciation of the possibilities of poetry as a medium, and to the manner in which this quickening is accomplished. They are learning to discriminate where formerly they only stared, and to experiment discreetly where formerly they scoffed. And we are reaping the benefits of this change of front.

But in a way too our own task becomes more difficult. If a poem is frankly impossible it means little beyond a glance at a stanza or two and the licking of the return envelope. But if it is nearly good enough and yet not quite, as so many poems are today, it means reading and rereading, consultation and heart-searching. And at last often an uncomfortable doubt as to the validity of our ultimate decision.

Yet this is a drawback which we gladly endure. For out of these writers of "almost good" verse will come the great audience for which we are waiting, and out of these foothills of patient students will come perhaps some day the mountain-peak of strength and beauty which is the ultimate hope of our labors.

E. T.

THE AMERICAN IMAGE

There cannot but be interest for us when the new field of American poetry is surveyed by an observer who brings a fresh eye, an enthusiastic and receptive nature, and a literary tradition quite other than our own. Jean Catel is a young French student and poet who, after a year at the

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University of Minnesota, has lately returned home, leaving his recorded impressions behind him in a thesis which won him his degree. Invalided by the war, he was sent to the United States by the French government to aid in that general *rapprochement* so much desired in this cosmopolitan day. His prime object was to "understand better the wonderland which had given birth to Whitman and Poe;" besides, he intended to gather literary documents and, if chance offered, to write something on the modern poetry of America. Not expecting to find "a really representative group of poets," his joy in his discovery of the current movement and its figures was such that he enrolled at Minneapolis to give shape to his impressions. To Whitman and Poe he now added (in a phrase from his own letter) "the boys"—Sandburg, Frost, Masters, Lindsay—and it is upon them that his thesis largely rests.

To the Frenchman, M. Catel reminds us, Roland, the Crusaders, the Revolution, Napoleon, 1870, have been intimate parts of the poetical treasure. What are their equivalents, he asks, in America? "If poetry is nothing but a decoration of our feelings, our fancies, our passing moods"—to quote his preface—"if verse is nothing but a pleasant pattern that can be easily borrowed from an extraneous tradition, there is an American poetry"—as numbers of pretty poems in the magazines and daily press exist to testify. "But if poetry, like every manifestation of art, is the very heart-beat of the race, then we ask again, 'Is there an American poetry?'" It is his pleasant mission to assure us that

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the tradition is shaping, and that the poetry has, in fact, come into existence.

There is as the basis of every national art, says this Frenchman, a distinctive imagery. For literature there are general concepts, or images, that form the common heritage of poets or of prose-writers. Certain groups of images unite to make a tradition; they provide a frame through which is viewed the actual world in which the artist happens to live, and form his imaginative consciousness. The object of *The American Image*—so M. Catel entitles his paper—is to catch the hour when the American tradition is in the making, to secure the common ground upon which Poetry is engaged in building “her eternal monuments.”

Though M. Catel is constantly aware of the breadth of the country and of its effect on the shaping of our new art, his consciousness engages itself principally with but three sections: rural New England, Chicago and the Middle-west prairies, and the Indian-Spanish Southwest. From these quarters he draws his “images”: that image which may be an “abstract idea,” as New England Solitude; that which may be a “living reality,” as The Farmer, or a “topographical entity,” such as The Prairie; that of The City, as typified in the uproar, vigor and violence of Chicago, or that yielded by the “Side Scenery” of Arizona and New Mexico, with its wealth of light and color and its immemorial indigenes. Such are the *leit-motifs* of Catel’s American Sonata.

It will be seen readily enough that he does not recognize the entire range of the keyboard, and it becomes plain, on

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inspection, that he does not even strike all the notes within the octaves he has elected to employ. Like every other composer, he limits himself to the notes he needs. He selects his own pitch, chooses his own key, keeps to his own tonality. His object, as a visitor from a land in the enjoyment of a long and rich artistic tradition, is to assure himself—and us—that “the prelude of the great symphony whose starting signal has been given by Whitman” is rising in harmony and order on a basis well secured.

The writer himself may fairly be defended from a charge that his own basis is slight. To his various sectional images he adds a National Image—Lincoln as viewed by Robinson, Markham, Fletcher, Lindsay and others; also the image of the American Crowd, with “a rhythm of its own;” furthermore, the epic image of the Army and the Flag. And, for fuller measure, he considers at length the religious element—religious because it “consciously offers a spiritual aim to the idealism of the nation.” He dwells on the contrasting currents of a new Paganism and an abiding Puritanism, asserting that Lindsay, Masters, Sandburg and Frost present an interesting blending of both: “their pagan sensualism has a spiritual basis and thus tends to religion; their Puritanism applies to life in its physical forms and thus tends to sensualism.” Though the blending is not yet an accomplished fact, “the new beauty is in the making; and it is a comfort and a joy that beautiful things are created in the struggle for beauty in which the great artists of the New World are engaged.”

The American Image

Amid all this concern with Images, the Imagists themselves are naturally remembered. Though "the Imagist movement is international," and though our own members are "'transfuges' from the American sensationalism," yet their originality consists in having as a support the background of the American Image. This "casts a genuine light on their creations." The "swift flash" of Amy Lowell, the "bizarre decorations" of Fletcher, the vividness of H. D.'s symbols—all these have come under the spell of the American Image in its complexity and spirit-force; and it is "still more obvious that the symbol images of Carl Sandburg have been shaped and colored by his surroundings."

"In the end," our author concludes, "the great lesson taught by the modern poets of America to the world is one of unconquerable sincerity and direct idealism." And the new poetry appears to him as "an admirable attempt at creating the traditional background that sustains art."

And here the members of our practicing body of poets are left by a sympathetic and understanding visitor. They may now perceive, however unconscious heretofore, or however consciously radical and rebellious, that they are engaged in consolidating the framework of a new American art and even in establishing the tradition that a solid national art requires. Young M. Catel, returned to France, leaves the message behind him, and the present epitomizer of his beliefs and views leaves the fraternity face to face with its responsibilities.

H. B. F.